

COLLABORATION AND CONSERVATION

*Lessons Learned in Areas Managed
through National Park Service Partnerships*

*A Report on a Workshop
May 15-17, 2000
Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park
Woodstock, Vermont*

*The workshop was convened by
Conservation Study Institute and
QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment*

*for the National Park Service
Park Planning and Special Studies Program*

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Dear Colleagues,

It was our pleasure, as colleagues and partners in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, to host and participate in the workshop, “Planning and Collaboration: Lessons Learned in Areas Managed through National Park Service Partnerships,” held May 15-17, 2000. We know from experience that managing through a partnership is sometimes challenging. Nevertheless, it is tremendously rewarding, bringing benefits not only to the land and resources being managed, but also to the cooperating organizations and institutions, the community and region at large, and the general public.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park is located in Woodstock, Vermont, long renowned as one of New England’s most beautiful villages. The park includes the historic estate that has been successively the home of George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Billings, and Billings’s heirs, most recently his granddaughter, Mary French, and her husband, Laurence S. Rockefeller. The Park came into existence in 1992 through the generous gift of Mary and Laurence Rockefeller, with a mission to interpret its place in American conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America. The establishment of the National Park Service’s Conservation Study Institute, based at the park, extends this park mission to a broader audience.

The park operates in partnership with the Billings Farm & Museum, which is privately owned and operated by the Woodstock Foundation and is situated within the park’s protection zone. An operating dairy farm and historical museum of rural Vermont culture, the Billings Farm & Museum engages its visitors in interactive learning that fosters appreciation for responsible agriculture and sustainable land use. The partnership between the National Park Service and the Woodstock Foundation includes operational collaboration to present the park and the museum to the public. The foundation also holds a dedicated endowment fund for preservation and conservation of the park’s historic resources.

Real partnerships, based on common goals developed and shared by public and private partners, are necessary if the National Park Service is to advance its dual mission of assuring preservation and public enjoyment of partnership areas. There is much to learn from the people who have been in the forefront of developing, planning, and managing the many innovative partnership parks and Congressionally designated conservation areas that mark the recent decades of the Service. We firmly believe that partnerships and collaboration will remain essential elements of the National Park Service and, indeed, the world of conservation in the future.

We must first understand the scope of what is possible and then work together to define a clear vision and steps that will take us there. The workshop and this report are important first steps in that process. Please get involved.

Rolf Diamant
Superintendent
Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park

David A. Donath
President
The Woodstock Foundation, Inc.

Dear Colleagues,

The Conservation Study Institute is built on partnerships. It was therefore a special pleasure for the Conservation Study Institute and QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment, a founding partner of the Institute, to convene this workshop on “Planning and Collaboration: Lessons Learned in Areas Managed through National Park Service Partnerships” in cooperation with the NPS Park Planning and Special Studies Program.

The workshop’s partnership theme, together with our commitment to learning from practitioners and their experience, provided an ideal opportunity for our collaboration and builds on the missions of our two organizations. The Conservation Study Institute’s mission is to create opportunities for dialogue, inquiry, and lifelong learning to enhance the stewardship of landscape and communities. QLF is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to support the rural communities and environment of eastern Canada and New England, and to create models for stewardship of natural resources and cultural heritage which can be applied worldwide.

The twenty-five people who participated in the workshop brought rich experience with cross-sectoral partnerships involving the National Park Service and a diverse array of partners. Their stories of how these partnership areas have developed to protect natural and cultural heritage—and to encompass lived-in landscapes as well as wild areas—demonstrates the importance of community-based conservation for the stewardship of America’s special places. Successful experience with partnership areas will be central to our evolving National Park System in the coming century and to the conservation of landscapes in communities across the country. This approach is a trend paralleled in other countries around the world.

At this workshop, participants examined the lessons learned from real experiences in real places and suggested steps to enhance future partnerships. We are enthusiastic about the findings and recommendations of this workshop, and look forward to convening another workshop on this theme in the near future. We welcome your comments and ideas on ways to move this dialogue forward.

Nora Mitchell
Director
Conservation Study Institute

Jessica Brown
Vice President for International Programs
QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment

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FOREWORD

In 1970 Congress declared that the units of the National Park System were a cumulative expression of our national heritage. During the past 30 years there have been several cycles of expansion of the system to encompass different types of resources and different strategies for protecting them so they will be unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Increasingly, the recent designations rely on partnerships and shared investment in planning and management.

In the past year alone, Congress has directed the National Park Service (NPS) to study more than 35 new areas for potential designation, many of them reflecting local interest in some type of relationship with the NPS that does not necessarily involve the traditional formula of federal acquisition and management. At the same time, the NPS is being asked to continue a long tradition of providing assistance to partners working in areas outside of the units of the National Park System.

As the NPS responds to demands for recognition, formal designation, and technical and financial assistance, discussions about the future of the agency often focus on three major questions:

- How will the NPS reach out to the changing and diverse population of the United States?
- How will the national parks address increasing public use pressures?
- How will the national parks be protected from threats that originate primarily beyond park boundaries?

Perhaps the “problem” of the burgeoning interest in establishing “nontraditional” areas is really the solution: that the agency must look beyond the traditional models and recognize the potential of partnerships to help the NPS fulfill its mission to protect our nation’s natural and cultural heritage. Perhaps the distinction between “internal” and “external” programs is no longer valid because protecting the parks depends upon our ability to expand a stewardship ethic throughout the nation, to protect resources at the local level, and to see the units of the National Park System as hubs in a broader network of protected areas.

Differing assumptions about the costs and benefits of “nontraditional” areas are often reflected in the challenges of studying and planning for Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Trails, Heritage Areas, and the new parks that are managed through complex partnerships. Even though there is extensive experience with partnership work, the opportunity to learn from common

experiences is often constrained by the fact that these similar issues are being addressed by different programs and offices within the NPS. There are also few opportunities to acknowledge the insights gained from the expanding use of partnerships and to examine the implications for both the agency and its partners.

It is within this context that the NPS Park Planning and Special Studies Program, the Conservation Study Institute, and the QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment convened a workshop to explore the experiences of working in partnerships that are outside the traditional NPS management model and to propose next steps for creating more effective long-term conservation partnerships.

As discussed in this report, workshop participants described factors that contribute to successful partnerships and the benefits that extend throughout the National Park System, even to the “traditional” national parks. They questioned whether there are really any “traditional” parks since even the Yellowstone and Yosemite increasingly work with and depend on partners. The workshop also highlighted a concern of many NPS staff and partners that the partnership activities and programs lack the same respect and prestige afforded traditional parks.

Looking to the future, workshop participants identified a series of challenges: to foster in the institutional culture of the NPS a deeper understanding of partnerships, to create a broader agency vision that includes the full spectrum of partnerships, and to learn from the growing experience of both the NPS and its partners about building effective long-term collaborations. Although they proposed ideas for next steps to begin to meet these challenges, they also recognized the need to bring more voices to the table to develop a comprehensive, strategic approach.

This report is part of an ongoing discussion about these issues. The Park Planning and Special Studies Program, the Conservation Study Institute, and the QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment intend to convene additional workshops. We hope that readers of this report will be able to use the findings, suggestions, and ideas to protect resources for the enjoyment of future generations on either side of a boundary that designates a park, river, trail, or heritage area.

Warren Brown
Program Manager
Park Planning and Special Studies, NPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1916, the National Park Service (NPS) has served as the land manager for the country's National Park System, conserving resources unimpaired for future generations, and providing interpretation and public access. The NPS also manages a number of programs related to natural resource conservation, outdoor recreation, and historic preservation that rely primarily on partnerships with others outside the federal government. In the past two decades, these two roles have been combined in new models for planning and managing many long distance trails, wild and scenic rivers, heritage areas, and new units of the National Park System. These partnership models represent an ongoing evolution of conservation that relies increasingly on long-term collaboration between public and private organizations to protect, manage, and interpret natural and cultural resources.

People working on new models of parks and “partnership areas” and those in the agency providing assistance through partnership programs face substantial challenges working within a framework designed for “traditional” NPS units. Although there is now extensive experience with collaborative models that benefit both parks and partnerships, there have been few opportunities to examine what has been learned, share this knowledge with others, or incorporate these lessons into NPS policy and practice.

In May 2000, twenty-five people with partnership experience from the NPS and partner organizations participated in a workshop, “Planning and Collaboration: Lessons Learned in Areas Managed through National Park Service Partnerships.” This workshop was convened by the Conservation Study Institute and QLF/Atlantic Center for the Environment for the NPS Park Planning and Special Studies Program.

Based on their collective experience in a variety of places across the country, workshop participants examined the process and evolution of effective partnerships, and identified operating principles for successful long-term collaboration. Participants described the benefits of working in collaboration—benefits that strengthen the entire National Park System. They also discussed the disparity they perceive in agency recognition of partnership areas and programs compared to areas that are designated as units of the National Park System. There was a sense that this disparity results in missed opportunities to enhance the stewardship of national parks and other places that are part of the nation's heritage.

The vision that emerged from discussions was of a future in which units of the National Park System and the partnership areas outside the System are all part of

a nationwide network of parks and conservation areas that are relevant to a diverse population. In this future, nonprofit organizations, institutions, businesses, and public sector agencies all are important players. NPS involvement in this network of collaboration is central, founded in the agency's traditional strengths but extending beyond this tradition to include its extensive experience in partnerships. Agency programs that support conservation efforts outside of the National Park System are recognized as a valuable and integral part of the agency's mission. The sense of competition that many participants feel today between parks and partnership areas is replaced with an appreciation for the contributions of each to conservation and the desire to learn from each other's experiences. Workshop participants recognized the potential of the NPS to be a leader in working collaboratively, and they embraced the idea that it was time to articulate and demonstrate a broader role for the NPS in working with others on stewardship of the American landscape.

The group made a number of recommendations for next steps that include the following:

- ✧ Create additional opportunities to learn from our partnership experience, involving both NPS staff and partner representatives.
- ✧ Develop means for recognizing the successes and contributions of partnership areas and programs, and for rewarding the individuals who make them work.
- ✧ Provide new tools and more flexibility in NPS planning.
- ✧ Revise management approaches to staff transition in partnership areas to retain institutional memory and ensure continuity of partner relationships.
- ✧ Develop clearer direction on the appropriate application of NPS management policies and other federal guidelines and requirements in partnership areas.

This report, which is based on the workshop discussions and written comments from workshop participants, is intended to contribute to a continuing dialogue—both within the NPS and between the NPS and its many partners—on the increasingly vital role of partnerships in conserving the heritage of America's most important landscapes.